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Guest Blogger Starling: Schrödinger's Rapist: or a guy's guide to approaching strange women without being maced

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by Sweet Machine

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Gentlemen. Thank you for reading.

Let me start out by assuring you that I understand you are a good sort of person. You are kind to children and animals. You respect the elderly. You donate to charity. You tell jokes without laughing at your own punchlines. You respect women. You like women. In fact, you would really like to have a mutually respectful and loving sexual relationship with a woman. Unfortunately, you don't yet know that woman—she isn't working with you, nor have you been introduced through mutual friends or drawn to the same activities. So you must look further afield to encounter her.

So far, so good. Miss LonelyHearts, your humble instructor, approves. Human connection, love, romance: there is nothing wrong with these yearnings.

Now, you want to become acquainted with a woman you see in public. The first thing you need to understand is that women are dealing with a set of challenges and concerns that are strange to you, a man. To begin with, we would rather not be killed or otherwise violently assaulted.

"But wait! I don't want that, either!"

Well, no. But do you think about it all the time? Is preventing violent assault or murder part of your daily routine, rather than merely something you do when you venture into war zones? Because, for women, it is. When I go on a date, I always leave the man's full name and contact information written next to my computer monitor.

This is so the cops can find my body if I go missing. My best friend will call or e-mail me the next morning, and I must answer that call or e-mail before noon-ish, or she begins to worry. If she doesn't hear from me by three or so, she'll call the police. My activities after dark are curtailed. Unless I am in a densely-occupied, well-lit space, I won't go out alone. Even then, I prefer to have a friend or two, or my dogs, with me. Do you follow rules like these?

So when you, a stranger, approach me, I have to ask myself: Will this man rape me?

Do you think I'm overreacting? One in every six American women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime. I bet you don't think you know any rapists, but consider the sheer number of rapes that must occur. These rapes are not all committed by Phillip Garrido, Brian David Mitchell, or other members of the Brotherhood of Scary Hair and Homemade Religion. While you may assume that none of the men you know are rapists, I can assure you that at least one is. Consider: if every rapist commits an average of ten rapes (a horrifying number, isn't it?) then the concentration of rapists in the population is still a little over *one in sixty*. That means four in my graduating class in high school. One among my coworkers. One in the subway car at rush hour. Eleven who work out at my gym. How do I know that you, the nice guy who wants nothing more than companionship and True Love, are not this rapist?

I don't.

When you approach me in public, you are Schrödinger's Rapist. You may or may not be a man who would commit rape. I won't know for sure unless you start sexually assaulting me. I can't see inside your head, and I don't know your intentions. If you expect me to trust you—to accept you at face value as a nice sort of guy—you are not only failing to respect my reasonable caution, you are being cavalier about my personal safety.

Fortunately, you're a good guy. We've already established that. Now that you're aware that there's a problem, you are going to go out of your way to fix it, and to make the women with whom you interact feel as safe as possible.

To begin with, you must accept that **I set my own risk tolerance**. When you approach me, I will begin to evaluate the possibility you will do me harm. That possibility is never 0%. For some women, particularly women who have been victims of violent assaults, any level of risk is unacceptable. Those women do not want to be approached, no matter how nice you are or how much you'd like to date them. Okay? That's their right. Don't get pissy about it. Women are under no obligation to hear the sales pitch before deciding they are not in the market to buy.

The second important point: **you must be aware of what signals you are sending by your appearance and the environment**. We are going to be paying close attention to your appearance and behavior and matching those signs to our idea of a threat.

This means that some men should never approach strange women in public. Specifically, if you have truly unusual standards of personal cleanliness, if you are the prophet of your own religion, or if you have tattoos of gang symbols or Technicolor cockroaches all over your face and neck, you are just never going to get a good response approaching a woman cold. That doesn't mean you're doomed to a life of solitude, but I suggest you start with internet dating, where you can put your unusual traits out there and find a woman who will appreciate them.

Are you wearing a tee-shirt making a rape joke? NOT A GOOD CHOICE—not in general, and definitely not when approaching a strange woman.

Pay attention to the environment. Look around. Are you in a dark alley? Then probably you ought not approach a woman and try to strike up a conversation. The same applies if you are alone with a woman in most public places. If the public place is a closed area (a subway car, an elevator, a bus), even a crowded one, you may not realize that the woman's ability to flee in case of threat is limited. Ask yourself, "If I were dangerous, would this woman be safe in this space with me?" If the answer is no, then it isn't appropriate to approach her.

On the other hand, if you are both at church accompanied by your mothers, who are lifelong best friends, the woman is as close as it comes to safe. That is to say, still not 100% safe. But the odds are pretty good.

The third point: Women are communicating all the time. **Learn to understand and respect women's communication to you.**

You want to say *Hi* to the cute girl on the subway. How will she react? Fortunately, I can tell you with some certainty, because she's already sending messages to you. Looking out the window, reading a book, working on a computer, arms folded across chest, body away from you = do not disturb. So, y'know, *don't disturb her*. Really. Even to say that you like her hair, shoes, or book. A compliment is not always a reason for women to smile and say thank you. You are a threat, remember? You are Schrödinger's Rapist. Don't assume that whatever you have to say will win her over with charm or flattery. Believe what she's signaling, and back off.

If you speak, and she responds in a monosyllabic way without looking at you, she's saying, "I don't want to be rude, but please leave me alone." You don't know why. It could be "Please leave me alone because I am trying to memorize *Beowulf*." It could be "Please leave me alone because you are a scary, scary man with breath like a water buffalo." It could be "Please leave me alone because I am planning my assassination of a major geopolitical figure and I will have to kill you if you are able to recognize me and blow my cover."

On the other hand, if she is turned towards you, making eye contact, and she responds in a friendly and talkative manner when you speak to her, you are getting a green light. You can continue the conversation until you start getting signals to back off.

The fourth point: **If you fail to respect what women say, you label yourself a problem.**

There's a man with whom I went out on a single date—afternoon coffee, for one hour by the clock—on July 25th. In the two days after the date, he sent me about fifteen e-mails, scolding me for non-responsiveness. I e-mailed him back, saying, "Look, this is a disproportionate response to a single date. You are making me uncomfortable. Do not contact me again." It is now October 7th. Does he still e-mail?

Yeah. He does. About every two weeks.

This man scores higher on the threat level scale than Man with the Cockroach Tattoos. (Who, after all, is guilty of nothing more than terrifying bad taste.) You see, Mr. E-mail has made it clear that he ignores what I say when he wants something from me. Now, I don't know if he is an actual rapist, and I sincerely hope he's not. But he is certainly Schrödinger's Rapist, and this particular Schrödinger's Rapist has a probability ratio greater than one in sixty. Because a man who ignores a woman's NO in a non-sexual setting is more likely to ignore NO in a sexual setting, as well.

So if you speak to a woman who is otherwise occupied, you're sending a subtle message. It is that your desire to interact trumps her right to be left alone. If you pursue a conversation when she's tried to cut it off, you send a message. It is that your desire to speak trumps her right to be left alone. *And each of those messages indicates that you believe your desires are a legitimate reason to override her rights.*

For women, who are watching you very closely to determine how much of a threat you are, this is an important piece of data.

The fifth and last point: **Don't rape.** Nor should you commit these similar but less severe offenses: don't assault. Don't grope. Don't constrain. Don't brandish. Don't expose yourself. Don't threaten with physical violence. Don't threaten with sexual violence.

Shouldn't this go without saying? Of course it should. Sadly, that's not the world I live in. You may be beginning to realize that it's not the world you live in, either.

Miss LonelyHearts wishes you happiness and success in your search for romantic companionship.